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ABSTRACT

The development and initial validation of a new self-report instrument, the Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI), are presented. The DSI represents the first attempt to create a multidimensional measure of differentiation based on Bowen Theory, focusing specifically on adults (aged over 25 years), their current significant relationships, and their relations with families of origin. Among family therapists, Bowen Theory is regarded as the most comprehensive explanation of the development of psychological problems from a systemic perspective. A principal components factor analysis on a sample of 311 normal adults (98 males and 213 females) (mean age of 36.8 years) in New York and California suggested the following 4 dimensions: (1) emotional reactivity; (2) reactive distancing; (3) fusion with parents; and (4) "I" position. Scales constructed from these factors were found to be moderately correlated in the expected direction, internally consistent, and significantly predictive of trait anxiety. The potential contribution of the DSI is discussed for testing Bowen Theory, as a clinical assessment tool, and as an indicator of psychotherapeutic outcome. Three tables present study findings. (Author/SLD)

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The Differentiation of Self Inventory:

Development and Initial Validation

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Abstract

In this paper, we present the development and initial validation of a new self-report instrument, the Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI). The DSI represents the first attempt to create a multi-dimensional measure of differentiation based on Bowen Theory, focusing specifically on adults (ages 25 +), their current significant relationships, and their relations with families of origin. Principal components factor analysis on a sample of 313 normal adults (mean age = 36.8) suggested four dimensions: Emotional Reactivity, Reactive Distancing, Fusion with Parents, and "I" Position. Scales constructed from these factors were found to be moderately correlated in the expected direction, internally consistent, and significantly predictive of trait anxiety. The potential contribution of the DSI is discussed -- for testing Bowen Theory, as a clinical assessment tool, and as an indicator of psychotherapeutic outcome.

The Differentiation of Self Inventory:

Development and Initial Validation

Among family therapists, Bowen Theory (Bowen, 1976, 1978) is regarded as the most comprehensive explanation of the development of psychological problems from a systemic perspective (Gurman, 1991; Nichols, 1984). Indeed, Bowen Theory provides a foundation for the field of family therapy that renders it distinct from the multitude of theoretical approaches to individual psychotherapy (Nichols, 1984). At present, many of Bowen's concepts -- differentiation of self, interlocking triangles, emotional cutoff, and so forth -- pervade the family systems literature. Despite the vast attention Bowen Theory has received from clinicians and theorists alike, there have been -- to date -- no programmatic attempts to test its validity with respect either to personality functioning or psychotherapy. In order to begin filling this notable gap, we developed the Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI), a self-report instrument based on Bowen Theory. In this paper, we present the initial psychometric support for the measure as well as plans for future validation efforts and implications for theory, research, and practice.

Of the various constructs that compose Bowen Theory, differentiation of self is the most critical to mature development and the attainment of psychological health. Differentiation of self involves intrapsychic as well as interpersonal functioning, and refers to the degree to which one is able to balance (a) emotional and intellectual functioning and (b) intimacy and autonomy in interpersonal relationships. According to Bowen's (e.g., 1978) notions about the family projection process, the level of differentiation that an individual is able to achieve in his or her lifetime is largely dependent on the degree of differentiation achieved by his/her parents. Theoretically, various phenomena vary as a function of one's level of differentiation. More

highly differentiated individuals are expected to establish more satisfying marriages, to have higher self-esteem, less chronic anxiety, to remain in emotional contact with their families of origin, to be ethical, principled thinkers, and to demonstrate better overall psychological adjustment (Bowen, 1976, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1990).

At the outset of this project, we could locate in the literature no measure of differentiation that takes into account adults' family of origin relationships, their intrapsychic functioning (Bowen's thinking-feeling continuum), and their functioning within significant current interpersonal relations (Bowen's togetherness-separateness continuum). While there are several self-report measures of separation/individuation based on object relations theory (e.g., Hoffman, 1984; Levine, Green, & Millon, 1986; Olver, Aries, & Batgos, 1990), these instruments were designed for late adolescents rather than for adults and do not address all of the intrapsychic and interpersonal aspects inherent in Bowen Theory. For example, none of these instruments includes items that deal with spousal relations or that reflect problems in balancing intimacy and autonomy. Hoffman's (1984) Psychological Separation Inventory (PSI), refers solely to separation from parents. Many of the items on the PSI, as well as on Levine et al.'s (1986) Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence, refer to behaviors that typify adolescence rather than adulthood, e.g., "My mother/father helps me to make my budget;" "When I do poorly in school, I feel I'm letting my mother/father down." While the content of Olver et al.'s (1990) Self-Other Differentiation Scale is more appropriate for adults, the instrument was developed for college students and its items largely reflect individuation processes rather than actual relationships, e.g., "I tend to be uncertain how good my ideas are until someone else approves of them."

We concluded, therefore, that although differentiation of self is the central construct in the most comprehensive family systems theory, it has never been adequately operationalized. Indeed, concern has repeatedly been expressed about the absence of empirical research on any of the basic principles or constructs in Bowen Theory (e.g., Gurman, 1991). If the theory is to continue to contribute significantly to the field, empirical evidence is needed to test (and subsequently modify) its basic assumptions. In developing the DSI, we sought to provide an instrument capable of examining (a) theoretical assumptions, (b) stable individual differences in adult functioning, and (c) psychotherapeutic outcomes from a systemic perspective.

Method

We began with definitions and descriptions of the construct taken from the extensive writings of Murray Bowen (1976, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1990). Then, a pool of 96 items tapping various attitudes, behaviors, feelings, and interpersonal situations exemplary of differentiation of self was generated by the authors and members of our research team. Items reflected the intrapsychic (e.g., emotional flooding, rational goal-directed behavior) and the interpersonal (e.g., emotional cutoff, triangulation) components of differentiation as described in the literature. Specifically, we focused on the ability to separate and balance thinking and feeling and the ability to tolerate closeness and separateness from others (current relationships as well as parents and siblings).

The initial questionnaire containing these 96 items was administered to 35 students in a graduate family therapy course and revised based on their feedback regarding content saturation (i.e., "Do the items relate to the construct definition?"), wording (i.e., "Is the wording clear and unambiguous?"), and general appropriateness. The following summarizes our

subsequent efforts to refine and validate the 89-item DSI based on a large sample of normal adults.

Subjects and Procedures

Adults ($N = 313$) age 25 and older in New York and California were asked to take part in a research project "which focuses on adults' interpersonal relationships and their relationships with their families of origin." Participants were (a) randomly selected faculty and staff at a large university, (b) graduate students in counseling psychology, clinical psychology, and social work, (c) parents of children on a suburban athletic team, and (d) available friends and acquaintances of research team members. Completed questionnaires were returned by 213 women and 98 men (2 gender unspecified), 75% of whom were married, 49% with children. On average, subjects aged 36.8 years ($SD = 9.69$, range 25-65). In terms of ethnicity, 5.1% of the sample were African American, 4.5% Asian, 2.2% Latino, 1.9% Native American, 82.7% white, and 3.2% other.

Participants were contacted by letter and asked to complete the DSI, a demographic sheet, and the trait version of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI-T; Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Lushene, 1970). To complete the DSI, the respondent reads each item and indicates on a scale from 1 to 6 the degree to which each item is "not at all characteristic" to "very characteristic" of him or her. The STAI-T, a well established 20 item self-report measure of relatively stable individual differences in anxiety proneness, was included in order to test the construct validity of the DSI.

Results

Factor Analysis

Our aim in conducting the factor analysis was to eliminate items that did not load on a single, clearly interpretable factor. Results were used to

create scales that could then be subjected to descriptive, reliability, and validity analyses.

A principal components factor analysis was conducted with orthogonal (varimax) rotation. Results of Cattell's scree test showed 4 factors accounting for 26.2% of the variance, with eigenvalues ranging from 11.43 to 3.34. To interpret the factors and construct scales, we considered only those items loading at least .40 on a single factor. Fifty of the original 89 items were retained based on this decision rule. We eliminated a few other items whose factor loadings were acceptable but whose content was not clearly compatible with the majority of items on their respective factors.

The following factors were identified (see Table 1). Factor 1, with 12 items, was defined as Emotional Reactivity. Items are either purely intrapsychic (e.g., "At times I'm so flooded with emotion I feel I can't think straight") or reflect emotional responses to interpersonal situations (e.g., "If someone is upset with me, I can't seem to let it go easily"). Factor 2, with 13 items, was defined as Reactive Distancing and reflects problems in current interpersonal relations as well as in relations with one's family of origin. Both fear of fusion ("I worry that I'll lose a sense of myself in intimate relationships") and emotional cutoff ("I have no desire to stay in contact with my parents") are represented in this factor. Factor 3, with 9 items, was defined as Fusion with Parents. The item content reflects intense emotional involvement (e.g., "If my parents died, I'm sure I'd feel as if I couldn't go on") and identification with parents as well as manifestations of the family projection process, that is, taking in parental values and expectations (e.g., "My values are identical in most ways to those of my parents"). Finally, Factor 4, with 10 items, reflects Bowen's (1978) concept of taking an "I" Position. Items reflect a clearly defined self (e.g., "No

matter what happens in my life, I know I'll never lose my sense of who I am") and the ability to adhere to one's convictions when pressured by others to do otherwise (e.g., "I will not compromise my own standards for myself just to please others").

Items that did not load substantially on any of the four factors reflected other aspects of Bowen Theory, such as triangulation (e.g., "I enjoy being the peacemaker in my family") and multigenerational patterns (e.g., "I play the same role in my family now as I did when I was a child"). Furthermore, none of the items we constructed about relations with one's children or with siblings loaded on the four major factors.

Descriptive Analyses

Subsequent analyses were conducted using scale scores derived from the results of the factor analysis. To compute these scores, we summed the raw scores and divided by the number of items comprising the scale. Thus scores on each scale could range from 1 to 6; higher scores reflect less differentiation on the Emotional Reactivity, Reactive Distancing, and Fusion with Parents scales and greater differentiation on the "I" Position scale.

Intercorrelations of the four scales are shown in Table 2. All correlations were moderate and statistically significant in the expected direction, ranging from $-.17$ to $.45$. The most highly correlated scales were Emotional Reactivity and Reactive Distancing.

Means and standard deviations for the total sample as well as by gender and by marital status are summarized in Table 3. These analyses showed that, overall, respondents reported relatively moderate levels of differentiation on all scales. Gender differences emerged only on Emotional Reactivity, with women reporting significantly greater ($M = 3.31$, $SD = .90$) difficulties in this area than men ($M = 2.87$, $SD = .73$), $F(1,278) = 16.12$, $p < .0001$. With

respect to marital status, only Reactive Distancing scores differed, with single respondents reporting relatively greater difficulties ($M = 3.03$, $SD = .78$) than married respondents ($M = 2.51$, $SD = .75$), $F(1,238) = 16.94$, $p < .0001$. For all scales, the two way interactions (gender X marital status) were nonsignificant.

Three of the four scales correlated inversely with age: Emotional Reactivity ($r = -.18$, $p < .004$), Reactive Distancing ($r = -.17$, $p < .01$), Fusion with Parents ($r = -.27$, $p < .0001$). The relationship between age and "I" Position was nonsignificant, $r = .04$.

Reliability and Construct Validity

Internal consistency alphas suggested high reliabilities for each of the four scales: Emotional Reactivity = .83; Reactive Distancing = .80; Fusion with Parents = .82; "I" Position = .80.

Pearson correlations between trait anxiety ratings (STAI-T; see Table 2) and each of the four DSI scales were statistically significant, ranging from $r = .16$ ($p < .01$; Fusion with Parents) to $.58$ ($p < .0001$; Emotional Reactivity). As predicted, there was an inverse relationship between STAI-T and "I" Position scores, $r = -.51$, $p < .0001$.

Discussion

Our aim, to construct a reliable, valid self-report measure of differentiation of self for adults, was realized in the present investigation. Items were developed from the theoretical writings of Murray Bowen, and scales were constructed based on a factor analysis of responses from a large sample of adults. By and large, the four factors that emerged from the factor analysis reflect clearly identifiable dimensions of differentiation as described by Bowen (1976, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1990). The first two factors reflect the primary domains in Bowen theory, intrapsychic

and interpersonal functioning. Specifically, items on the Emotional Reactivity factor reflect an imbalance on the feeling-thinking continuum, whereas items on the Reactive Distancing factor reflect problems on the togetherness-separateness continuum. The third factor, Fusion with Parents, reflects intense emotional involvement with one's parents, i.e., manifestations of Bowen's (e.g., 1978) "undifferentiated family ego mass" and "family projection process." In contrast to the three factors whose content reflects a lack of differentiation, items loading on the fourth factor, "I" Position, reflect aspects of identity and interpersonal functioning indicative of the ability to define a self and to behave rationally, assertively, and autonomously.

Subsequent analyses with the four DSI scales supported their reliability and construct validity. That is, internal consistency reliabilities were high, and each scale correlated significantly with trait anxiety. This latter finding is a noteworthy indicator of validity because, according to Bowen Theory, lack of differentiation is equated with chronic anxiety (Kerr & Bowen, 1990).

Perhaps more interesting, however, are other results that support the validity of the scales and the validity of various tenets of Bowen Theory. First, the moderate, significant intercorrelations of the scales support their validity; based on theory, one would expect the various concepts that make up the differentiation construct to be related but not identical. The finding that Emotional Reactivity, Reactive Distancing, and Fusion with Parents scores are positively intercorrelated and negatively associated with "I" Position supports the theoretical link between intrapsychic and interpersonal aspects of functioning. In line with theory, adults who reported more emotional reactivity and fusion with parents were more likely to indicate a tendency

toward reactive distancing and difficulties assuming an "I" position with others. Second, the present data on normal adults show moderate levels of differentiation on each of the scales. On Bowen's (1978) theoretical continuum of differentiation, most people are considered to be moderately differentiated. Third, the significantly greater difficulties reported by single adults, as compared with married adults, on the Reactive Distancing scale supports Bowen's assertion that distancing responses to interpersonal anxiety can hinder the achievement of a committed, intimate relationship.

Gender and age differences suggested some interesting patterns as well. First, while it is not surprising that in our culture women are more likely than men to report emotional reactivity, the lack of gender differences on the other scales is noteworthy. We expected, based on sex role socialization and self-in-relation theories (e.g., Miller, 1976), that women would be more likely than men to rate themselves higher on Fusion with Parents and lower on "I" Position. This was not the case, however. Second, with respect to age, the DSI scale most highly correlated with age was Fusion with Parents. This finding makes intuitive sense -- as adults mature, they are less likely to feel "stuck" in the undifferentiated family ego mass. More noteworthy, however, was the lack of association between age and scores on the "I" Position scale. This finding supports Bowen's contention that younger adults are just as capable as their older counterparts of defining a self and behaving autonomously.

Limitations and Implications

Although we attempted to sample a large, heterogeneous group of adults, results of the factor analysis are likely to have differed with a different sample. Known and unknown characteristics of our respondents need to be taken into account. The lack of gender differences on three of the scales may have

been due to androgyny in our fairly well educated sample, for example. Furthermore, only roughly half of the sample were parents. For this reason, it is likely that none of the DSI items about relations with children loaded on one of the major factors. Indeed, without children one cannot have experienced the multigenerational transmission process tapped by some of the original DSI items, e.g., "I find myself automatically reacting to my children as one or both of my parents did to me."

Ethnicity is another characteristic that should be noted, since less than 20% of the present sample identified themselves as minority members. Replication is needed with adults from various ethnic groups in order to test Bowen's assertion that differentiation of self is universally applicable (e.g., Kerr & Bowen, 1990). We suspect that in Latino cultures, for example, Fusion with Parents may not correlate significantly with trait anxiety. In Asian cultures, where autonomy and self-assertion are less acceptable than in western societies, "I" Position scores may correlate positively (rather than negatively, as found here) with anxiety.

Additional validation studies are planned in which relationships between the DSI scales¹ and theoretically and clinically meaningful constructs will be examined. For example, DSI scores are expected to be associated with symptomatology, general psychological adjustment, marital and life satisfaction, problem solving ability, and ethical, principled thinking. One interesting test of Bowen Theory using the DSI would involve examining the degree to which marital partners report similar levels of differentiation. Alternatively, we might test the degree to which adult children report levels of differentiation consistent with those of their parents.

It is expected that the DSI can contribute to the practice of family therapy in at least three ways. First, the instrument provides a means for

identifying individual differences in various aspects of functioning that are purportedly stable and central to a client's wellbeing intrapsychically as well as interpersonally. Second, the DSI could be used as a screening device to identify the family member most likely to benefit from treatment. (Bowen recommended working only with the most differentiated adult in a family, theorizing that change achieved by this individual will indirectly benefit the entire family system.) Third, since differentiation is multidimensional, a comparative analysis of a client's scores on the four DSI scales can help pinpoint which aspect of differentiation is relatively most problematic (e.g., fusion with parents or emotional reactivity) and whether the client copes with his or her interpersonal difficulties by reactive distance or cutoff). Indeed, the understanding of differentiation provided by the DSI in future investigations could result in important implications for treatment. For example, reactive distancing on the part of spouses in marital therapy might suggest the need for interpersonal, experiential interventions (e.g., Greenberg & Johnson, 1988) or for family-of-origin work (Framo, 1992), whereas emotionally reactive young adults who are fused with parents may benefit more from an individual, insight oriented approach.

Finally, the DSI also lends itself to the examination of client outcome in psychotherapy. If the DSI scales are demonstrated to be sensitive to changes in the client's differentiation over the course of therapy and are associated with overall psychological adjustment, as Bowen Theory asserts, increases in differentiation may be observed regardless of the approach to treatment.

All of these ideas are, of course, speculative and await verification.

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Footnote

¹ Copies of the instrument may be obtained from the first author.

Table 1

Results of the Factor Analysis

Factor/Sample Items	Factor Loading
Emotional Reactivity	
I react impulsively to situations and regret my actions later.	.50
At times I'm so flooded with emotion I feel I can't think straight.	.63
If someone is upset with me, I can't seem to let it go easily.	.41
Reactive Distancing	
When I'm with my spouse/partner, I often feel smothered.	.40
I worry that I'll lose a sense of myself in intimate relationships.	.52
I have no desire to stay in contact with my parents.	.40
Fusion with Parents	
My values are identical in most ways to those of my parents.	.62
I consider one of my parents to be my best friend.	.55
If my parents died, I'm sure I'd feel as if I couldn't go on.	.50
"I" Position	
I am not easily influenced by others.	.44
I will not compromise my own standards for myself just to please others.	.63
No matter what happens in my life, I know I'll never lose my sense of who I am.	.52

Table 2

Intercorrelations of DSI Scales and Correlations with Trait Anxiety

	ER	RD	FP	IP
Emotional Reactivity (ER)	-			
Reactive Distancing (RD)	.45**	-		
Fusion with Parents (FP)	.31**	.18*	-	
"I" Position (IP)	-.37**	-.34**	-.17*	-
STAI-T	.58**	.55**	.16*	-.51**

Note. STAI-T = State-Trait Anxiety Inventory -- trait version (Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Lushene, 1970). * $p < .01$. ** $p < .0001$.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations on DSI Scales by Gender and by Marital Status

Scale	Gender						Marital Status			
	Total		Male		Female		Single		Married	
	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
Emotional Reactivity	3.17	.87	2.87 ^a	.73	3.31 ^a	.90	3.12	.92	3.32	.8
Reactive Distancing	2.61	.78	2.73	.75	2.55	.79	3.03 ^b	.78	2.51 ^b	.7
Fusion with Parents	2.65	.98	2.55	.77	2.71	1.03	2.61	.95	2.67	.9
"I" Position	4.10	.75	4.09	.70	4.11	.77	4.16	.68	4.09	.7

Note. All scale scores range from 1 to 6. Higher Emotional Reactivity, Reactive Distancing, and Fusion with Parents scores reflect less differentiation, whereas higher "I" Position scores reflect greater differentiation. ^a $F(1,278) = 16.12, p < .0001$.

^b $F(1, 238) = 16.94, p < .0001$.